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B-H board weighs offering middle school technology related curriculum program

By J.G. Wallace

Northern Wells Schools may have led the way, but Bluffton-Harrison M.S.D. Schools will likely follow suit and launch their own "Project Lead the Way," technology education initiative.

During Monday evening's meeting of the Bluffton-Harrison board of school trustees, the board welcomed Northern Well's Curriculum Director Amy Leeson who gave the board a presentation on Project Lead the Way and efforts in the Northern Wells district to implement the program.

Project Lead The Way (PLTW) is a not-for-profit organization that promotes pre-engineering courses for middle and high school students. PLTW forms partnerships with public schools, higher education institutions and the private sector to increase the quantity and quality of engineers and engineering technologists graduating from our educational system.

Project Lead the Way recognizes that in the United States there is a critical shortage of engineers and engineering technologists entering the field at a time when technology is reinventing itself every few years.

The PLTW curriculum was first introduced to 12 New York State high schools in the 1997-98 school year. A year later, PLTW field tested its four unit Middle School Program in three middle schools. Today, the programs are offered in over 1,300 schools in 45 states and the District of Columbia.

Earlier this year Norwell hired an instructor and began the process of establishing a Project Lead the Way Program in their schools.

Leeson said she had first heard of the program while attending the meeting and thought it would be a good way for Northern Wells to bolster students seeking careers in engineering or technology related fields.

"We had quite a few students who wanted to be engineers," Leeson said. "With Project Lead the Way it is typically a pre-engineering curriculum."

Leeson said the organization was founded to give students the background knowledge needed for high technology fields.

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"As we see how our careers are changing we know we have to keep up with that in the high schools," Leeson said. Leeson said the courses offered through Project Lead the Way are typically integrated with the school's existing math and science offerings.

Leeson said that schools across the country involved with Project Lead the Way all teach a standard curriculum using the same books, materials and software. Schools with a Project Lead the Way offering all lease the same software packages through the organization.

Leeson said the program offers students exposure to real world problems. "The big push is that real world problem solving," Leeson said. "The nice piece to this students can get articulated credit with Ivy Tech, IPFW, Purdue, Rose Hulman is coming on board."

"There is a curriculum that the teachers must teach and there is a standard assessment that the country takes with this program," Leeson said.

"We can't change it at Norwell," Leeson said. "It has to be the same test the rest of the country takes."

Leeson said the program offers a total of 8 courses, with the first required one being an introduction to engineering.

Leeson said the Northern Wells Schools have yet to determine how large the first group of students involved will be, but there is a large pool of eligible students. To be enrolled students must have taken or be in the process of taking an Algebra 1 course.

School districts also must use the dedicated hardware required by the program. Leeson said the cost of initiating the program at Norwell is estimated to be around \$40,000 between hardware, materials, and having a teacher complete the required certification course as a Project Lead the Way educator.

"This is the expensive part, I'll be very blunt with you," Leeson said. "It is expensive."

The Bluffton-Harrison Schools will be implementing the program at the middle school level with optional participation by ninth graders, through the program's Gateway to Technology program.

The middle school curriculum offers components on modeling, electronics, aerospace engineering, science and technology, and robotics.

All teachers involved in the program must complete a required two-week summer training class. In addition a guidance counselor must complete an annual guidance training program.

Middle School Principal Jon Bennett recently visited a middle school level program in Brownsburg and spent the day observing how the program works.

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Julie A. Koschnick said the program could be implemented in the district through the professional development budget item.

Presently the program is offered at Carroll, Leo, Homestead, and Huntington High Schools.

Each individual school district can decide what grade levels the middle school program is offered at, and whether the course will be required or an elective course.

Norwell will be instituting the high school level program at the start of the 2007-08 school year.

There is no required textbook for the initial course, but schools typically charge a minimal materials fee for the

non-reusable items in the engineering hands on projects.

Koschnick said the program would be a good enrichment offering for the middle school students. Students at the middle school level would be able to earn high school credits by transferring the credits to the high school.

Koschnick said she had yet to determine a cost for implementing the program, and it would be premature to set a figure. The two-week teacher training is anticipated to cost between \$1,200 and \$2,500 depending on the course site selected.

In other business the board accepted the resignation of Ken Ballinger as varsity girls tennis coach. Darryl Elliott was named as a paid Future Lady Tigers coach.

A maternity leave was approved for Schlaura Linderwall, who will work up until her delivery date in April but not return until the start of the 2007-08 school year.

The board approved a policy that will require any item to be added to the board's agenda by the public to be submitted to the superintendent no later than noon on three business days before a board meeting.

The board also adopted three policies required by the state. The first policy provides for board members to take an annual oath of office, the next addresses complimentary sports or activity tickets and requires the superintendent to establish guidelines, and the last is a policy for accommodating the rights of homeless students.

Koschnick also submitted a conflict of interest form as her fiancée is now employed with the engineering and architectural firm Barton-Coe-Vilamaa, and the firm has been involved with several projects in the district.

The board also named attorney Roy Johnson as their primary legal counsel.

The board also approved two grant applications seeking funding from the Wells County Foundation. The first application is to fund a visit next year by Ruby Payne, an author and expert on poverty related educational issues.

The other application seeks funds to erect a fence around a habitat area being developed at the middle school as part of an Eagle Scout project by Drew Neuenschwander.

Also approved was a field trip on May 19 to Cedar Point for middle school band students. The students will be paying the costs of admission and bus charter.

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